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MAGAZINES
FOR
THE MILLIONS

Gender and Commerce in the
Ladies' Home Journal
and the
Saturday Evening Post
1880-1910

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I would also like to thank my friends and family for sustaining me through the long days of this project. Anne Durst, Catherine Burroughs, and Amy White discussed the book's themes with me and lifted my spirits when the going got rough, as did my sister, Cate Damon, and my brother, Ken Damon. My daughters Laura Damon-Moore and Stephanie Damon-Moore have given me great joy, and they have regularly reminded me that books and papers are not the most important things in life. Their caregivers—Shelley Cousin, Caryl Alberts, Marjorie Whitley, Elizabeth Harken and Joyce Harken—have provided critical support for my work, and I thank them all.

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Introduction

Early in the twentieth century a midwesterner named LaRue Brown, doubtless speaking for many young men of his day, commented disparagingly on the distance between reality and the images presented in contemporary popular media. He announced in a letter to his sweetheart, Dorothy Kirchway, that he “greatly preferred to marry a human woman and not an abstraction from the *Ladies' Home Journal*.” This sentiment certainly makes sense in its personal context. Who would choose to marry an abstraction? But probing beneath the surface of Brown's pronouncement reveals questions of fundamental importance in our culture today.

Is it indeed possible, for example, to make a clear distinction between a “human” or “real” person and the “abstractions” that media convey? What exactly is the content of the gender abstractions conveyed by magazines like the *Ladies' Home Journal*? How do commercial media images affect the gender construction of women and men in a given culture or time? Is gender construction a significantly different process for women than for men? Just how is gender construction negotiated in everyday life?

This study explores these complex and critical issues by attending first to a more straightforward question. Why would a young man like LaRue Brown refer specifically to the *Ladies' Home Journal* when bemoaning abstractions about womanhood? The answer is clear: the *Ladies' Home Journal*, founded by Cyrus Curtis and Louisa Knapp Curtis in 1883, was a magazine of undisputed importance from its earliest days. Originally conceived as a newspaper supplement designed to appeal to women, the *Journal* developed in a few short years into the largest-selling magazine in the United States. It served as a prototype for other commercial magazines with its low price and heavy reliance on advertising for revenue. In 1903 the *Journal* became the first magazine in the world to surpass a million in paid circulation. The magazine's producers estimated, not unfairly, that by the 1910s one in every five American women was reading the *Journal*.

LaRue Brown therefore in all likelihood singled out the *Ladies' Home Journal* for comment because it was a familiar and enormously popular periodical in his day. The *Journal*'s popularity takes on a larger meaning for the historian, since it served as a forerunner and prototype of the female-targeted mass-circulation magazines that continue to thrive today. Exploring the reasons for the success of the *Ladies' Home Journal* goes a long way toward explain-

ing how female gender norms and commerce became entwined in the late nineteenth century.

But the story of the Curtis publishing enterprise is richer and more instructive than the *Journal's* history alone reveals, because the Curtises were not content to rest with the success of their first magazine. In 1897 they purchased a second magazine, the *Saturday Evening Post*. They originally targeted the *Post* to men in order to parallel their successful women's periodical. Unexpectedly, the *Post* floundered as a magazine for men. The commercial milieu of the late nineteenth century—informed as it already was by an emphasis on the female consumer—demanded a broadening of the newer magazine to target women as well. The resulting family-oriented *Post* was much more successful than its earlier male-targeted incarnation. By 1910 the *Saturday Evening Post* too had surpassed a million in circulation, and it eventually outstripped even the *Journal* in both circulation and advertising revenue.

By the early 1900s, then, the *Journal* and the *Post* were both periodicals targeted to particular gendered audiences: the *Journal* to women, the *Post* to both women and men. They featured a blend of gendered material and commercial messages that producers of other periodicals were quick to imitate. The *Journal* and the *Post* thus exemplified and conveyed to their readers a powerful and mutually reinforcing mix of gender and commerce that had come to characterize a significant segment of American popular culture by the turn of the century.

This combination of gender and commerce is now so institutionalized that we take it for granted. As women and men in our consumer culture we are defined in large part by what we eat and drink, by what we wear, and by what we use: we are what we buy. Thus gender is commercialized. In turn and in concert with this pattern, commerce is highly gendered. Certain items are sold in certain forums to women, certain items in certain forums to men. Commercialized gender and gendered commerce are phenomena that are pervasive, mutually reinforcing, thoroughly embedded in capitalist culture, and appealing to many consumers as well as useful to producers of commercial goods. As such, they seem almost immutable to change.

In spite of this seeming immutability, some feminists and analysts of commercialism have criticized this gendered commercial milieu. Numerous studies detail and disparage sexism in advertising, and some analysts go further to suggest that gender stereotyping in the media at large is problematic.² While these critiques are plausible and important, the relationship between gender and commerce remains underanalyzed and undertheorized. My reading of the *Journal* and the *Post* suggests that the critique of the gendered commercial milieu can be deepened and broadened by tracing its early days. There certainly were significant problems with the turn-of-the-century junction of gender and commerce, and exploring how these phenomena developed and came to inform one

another can provide a basis for conceiving a sophisticated critique of contemporary media and for formulating more positive alternatives.

I argue in this study that the *Ladies' Home Journal* and the *Saturday Evening Post* were prototypes that aided in the creation, development, and sustaining of the commercializing of gender and the gendering of commerce. They were conveyors of both gender messages and commercial messages, serving a new and central function in American popular culture.

These magazines were more than conveyors of messages, however. They were also commercial products produced by the publisher and editors, supported by revenues from advertisers, and read by millions of American women and men. I argue as well, therefore, that the magazines' producers, advertisers, and readers conspired, sometimes intentionally and sometimes unintentionally, in a process that helped to create a gendered commercial discourse and a commercial gender discourse. The magazines' producers—that is, the publisher and editors—were neither all-powerful nor all-knowing, and they relied on advertisers to buy space in their magazines and readers to buy the magazines and to attend at some level to their messages. Advertisers needed producers to convey their messages and readers to read their messages and act on them. Readers chose whether to buy the *Journal* and the *Post* or not, chose what to read within those magazines, and construed their own meaning from what they read and saw. In the biggest picture, however, the Curtis magazines' readers were constrained by the agenda-setting, circumscribing function of these magazines.

This hegemonic process, in which all parties were active though unequal players, is central to the story of the *Journal* and the *Post*.³ The story of these magazines and of the early days of the union between gender and commerce calls for careful attention to the complexities of both gender construction and popular culture production and consumption. Making sense of these processes presents serious challenges to scholars, and their historical configurations are particularly daunting to fathom. But in order to understand contemporary society as well as the past we must attempt to sort them out. To do so, I believe an interdisciplinary approach that borrows from women's history, men's history, and cultural studies is necessary to represent as accurately as possible the complexities of gender and popular culture.

Theorizing gender development has prompted a great deal of recent discussion among social scientists, literary critics, and historians. Historians have given particular attention to the metaphor of separate spheres and to the larger issue of gender as a social construct. The separate spheres metaphor has dominated much women's history analysis, and at the outset of my research the *Journal* and the *Post* appeared to embody the metaphor perfectly: the *Journal* spoke to women and the *Post* spoke to men. However, it soon became clear that

the separate spheres metaphor was of limited usefulness as an explanatory concept, for on the most immediate level the story of these two magazines was more complicated than the metaphor could represent or describe. The *Journal* was targeted to women, and its first editor was a woman; but its second editor was a man, which significantly altered the periodical's tone and content. The *Post* originally targeted men, but to succeed commercially it had to broaden its appeal to women. In terms of the magazines' producers and audience alone, therefore, the metaphor was inadequate.

In addition, as Linda Kerber notes, the language of separate spheres has been prone to "sloppy use" in which historians have referred, often interchangeably, to "an ideology imposed on women, a culture created by women, [and] a set of boundaries expected to be observed by women."⁴ This last variation suggests a physical separation between women and men, with women relegated to the private, domestic sphere, and men operating more freely in the public, economic sphere. This has been, indeed, a popular conception of spheres. The metaphor once again proves limited, however, when put to the test of the actual experience of Curtis magazine producers and readers. For example, Louisa Knapp Curtis edited the *Journal* from her home; hence, one might assume that a female editorship was synonymous with the private sphere, a male editorship with the public sphere. But after Louisa's editorship her male successor, Edward Bok, made a point of the fact that he wrote his own editorial for the *Journal* each month at his home. In addition, the *Journal* assumed and its readers confirmed the fact of late nineteenth-century women's numerous activities outside the home and the private sphere. These activities included church attendance, club work, and, for a significant minority of women, work for pay outside the home.⁵

Finally, the metaphor of separate spheres is undercut by the overall mission and character of the *Journal* and the *Post* as commercial products. Targeted to women, the *Journal* was indeed centrally concerned with issues of home life. Targeted first to men and then to men and women, the *Post* was more concerned with issues of the public realm and of work. But both the *Journal* and the *Post* proclaimed and stood for the value of consuming, an activity that transcended the metaphor of separate spheres. Consuming—that is, choosing and buying commercial products and using them in the home—was an activity performed in part in public for the good of the family and the home. Consuming, in turn, rested on the capacity of adults, particularly male adults, to earn money. This was also an activity usually performed in public for the good of the family and the home. It becomes clear that the metaphor of separate spheres obscures rather than clarifies the story of the *Ladies' Home Journal* and the *Saturday Evening Post* and their contributions to gender construction.

It is also evident, however, that the magazine producers themselves were, in some circumstances, informed by the notion of separate spheres. The very

creation of the *Ladies' Home Journal* and the *Saturday Evening Post* rested on the assumption that women and men have separate interests that can be packaged in separate commercial magazines. In addition, the magazine producers sometimes employed the metaphor explicitly as they tried to make sense of gender constructions and conventions of the day. Louisa Knapp Curtis employed the concept most directly, but she referred to it mainly to reject it. It behooves the historian, then, to employ the metaphor of separate spheres only to the extent that historical figures themselves have employed or have been clearly informed by it.

The metaphor of separate spheres has come in for criticism and rejection as a part of a larger criticism of dichotomous thinking and representation in general. Deconstructionists have catalogued the Western propensity for organizing ideas and behaviors into such diametrical oppositions as public-private, superior-inferior, dominant-submissive, and active-passive. For those interested in gender construction, the overarching dichotomy is, of course, male-female. Masculinity and femininity are traditionally defined as opposed and mutually exclusive categories. This traditional definition is deeply rooted and powerful. Exploring this definition and others, and examining rather than assuming their dichotomous character, becomes the major task of the gender historian.⁶

It is further necessary to historicize gender, to locate gender norms as carefully as possible in their context. As Joan Scott asserts, gender as a social construct

can only be determined specifically, in the context of time and place. We can write the history of that process only if we recognize that "man" and "woman" are at once empty and over-flowing categories. Empty because they have no ultimate, transcendent meaning. Over-flowing because even when they appear to be fixed, they still contain within them alternative, denied, or suppressed definitions.⁷

Careful attention to the language of gender construction, however, must be tempered by rigorous examination of the historical structures within which the language is being employed. The study of gender lends itself to deconstructionist analysis because gender norms are conveyed through specific uses of the language. But as Bryan D. Palmer writes in his largely negative assessment of poststructuralist and deconstructionist theory, "language is not life."⁸ While deconstruction is helpful in sensitizing historians to the importance of language in constructing identities, its emphasis on the supremacy of language downplays human agency and emphasizes social constraint.⁹ Analytical social history that is rooted in the lives and experiences of real people can anchor the historian who is interested in linguistic constructions, preventing what Palmer calls the "descent into discourse."¹⁰

Analysis of the *Journal* and the *Post* reveals some of the complexity of gender construction, since we see real people negotiating their own gender identities and interpreting gender norms for their readers. We also see the producers and readers negotiating power relationships with surprisingly uneven results. The magazines' production and consumption involved many very real struggles for power and economic privilege, some across gender lines and some within.

As we push beyond the concept of separate spheres and its attendant simplistic dichotomies to examine the ways gender is constructed, we see complex interactions both between women and men and between concepts of femininity and masculinity. We see, for example, that gender construction varies spatially, from culture to culture; temporally, from one historical period to another; and longitudinally, over the course of the life cycle.¹¹ Thus gender is a fundamentally unstable construct, constantly changing.¹² Denise Riley captures this instability when she substitutes a new question for Sojourner Truth's classic, "Ain't I a woman?" Riley asks instead, "Ain't I a fluctuating identity?"¹³ These fluctuating identities—female and male—are by nature difficult to capture, to characterize. In fact, the experiences of the Curtis publications' producers and the content of the magazines clearly demonstrate this difficulty. The producers faced the dilemma of what to include, what to exclude, what to emphasize, and what to de-emphasize with respect to gender norms in their magazines. The extent to which the magazines' messages are mixed internally reflects in part the challenge of trying to compartmentalize, much less to influence, gender norms in any given period.

It is helpful in this light to analyze each magazine as a whole. Most studies of magazines to date have focused on one segment or aspect of magazines, either their production (institutional histories/producer biographies) or their editorial matter, short stories, or advertising.¹⁴ Analyzing each magazine in its entirety over a significant period of time reveals both a measurable amount of internal contradiction and a demonstrable evolution in gender-related content over time. Above all we see the "layers of internal inconsistencies and the co-existence of multiple gender meanings" that Elizabeth Fox-Genovese suggests are more realistic than the earlier historiographic view of gender as a "coherent system of male domination."¹⁵ The magazines' gender-oriented content is instructive because their producers were attempting to sell huge numbers of magazines. It was not possible to do so by striking a single note; producers had to strike a chord with their gender messages that would appeal to as many readers as possible.¹⁶

The producers of the *Ladies' Home Journal* and the *Saturday Evening Post* were seeking a middle-class audience, and the evidence suggests that they succeeded. A class analysis of the turn-of-the-century media world reveals a stratification of the available materials. Newspapers and magazines

targeted either the working or the middle class, and producers like Cyrus Curtis and his editors worked hard to earn the stamp of middle-class approval for their commercial publications. There was a shift from a producer to a consumer emphasis within turn-of-the-century publications that transcended class; working-class and middle-class publications alike were informed by this shift.¹⁷

The producers of the Curtis magazines were appealing primarily to members of the middle class to which they themselves belonged, simplifying their task to some extent. Studies show that gender definition differs by race, ethnicity, age, class, sexuality, and region.¹⁸ Indeed, at any given time and in any given culture, many masculinities and femininities may coexist, peacefully or otherwise. As they spoke to white, upwardly-mobile, lower-middle-class and middle-class readers, the Curtis publication editors were communicating with people they considered to be essentially like themselves. To the extent that readers supported the magazines with their subscriptions, the messages of the magazines accordingly reflected a range of gender constructs acceptable to a certain segment of the late nineteenth-century white population.¹⁹

There were at the same time major differences between the two magazines that we must account for. The *Ladies' Home Journal* and the *Saturday Evening Post* were mass-circulation magazines produced by the same publisher, both intended for white middle-class readers. One might assume therefore that their rhetoric would be similar. But comparing the two magazines highlights two different discourses that the personalities of the editors alone cannot explain. We see from the earliest days of both magazines, for example, that the *Journal* was more highly "gendered" than the *Post*. The *Journal* was more openly targeted to women than the *Post* was to men, and it more consciously reflected upon matters of gender construction. The explicitly comparative approach afforded by the juxtaposition of these two magazines suggests that gender construction, at least as it was expressed on paper, was a significantly different process for women than it was for men.

This comparative approach also demonstrates that, while gender norms may have been presented differently in the two magazines, they were at the same time interactive. That is, norms regarding masculinity affected norms regarding femininity, and vice versa.²⁰ At some points in history, shifts in gendered expectations and their interactive effects have been profound. For example, when men left farms in order to work in factories with the onset of the Industrial Revolution, a whole set of complementary gendered expectations for women was established. One scholar suggests that we have yet to write the history of this complementary "Consumer Revolution."²¹ The relationship between gender and commerce embodied by the *Journal* and the *Post* does, in fact, illuminate some of the contours of the "Consumer Revolution." The story of the *Ladies' Home Journal* and the *Saturday Evening Post* points clearly to a

set of interactive norms that centered in large part on women's "new" role as consumer and men's "old" role as provider.

The comparative approach also highlights the fact that people are not highly gendered beings every moment of their lives; as Denise Riley notes, it is "not possible to live twenty-four hours a day soaked in the immediate awareness of one's sex."²² This does not mean that the culture fails to designate some behaviors and attributes as womanly and some as manly. Nor does it mean that individuals never view themselves in gendered ways. It does mean, however, that historians must attend closely to exactly how women and men are being characterized by given commentators at given times, and to what purpose. Significantly, for example, the *Journal* and the *Post* both viewed women as quite constantly and continuously gendered beings. The *Journal's* format and content revolved around this assumption, and much of the only explicitly gendered discussion in the *Post* centered on a conception of women as women that found no parallel for men. The reasons for this particular approach are twofold. First, as Simone de Beauvoir observed in the mid-twentieth century, woman is "other." Because the masculine is the norm, the feminine must be elaborated, signified, and explained. Second, women at the turn of the century were actively agitating for change, and they were altering their role in important ways. In contrast and in reaction, the major emphasis with regard to the male role was on preserving the status quo.

This emphasis on preserving the masculine status quo must, however, be examined rather than assumed. Steve Craig in *Men, Masculinity, and the Media* suggests that too many feminist analyses of the media accept the "masculine as norm" phenomenon without question, viewing portrayals of men in the media as unproblematic or even exemplary.²³ What we need are more studies that do precisely what these studies do not and the *Post* did not do—that is, examine the media treatment of men as men.

The comparison of the two magazines therefore yields important revelations, and it points to the need for more explicitly comparative works of gender history. Too many studies in women's history employ direct analysis of women's lives and ideas while resting on unexamined assumptions about men's lives and ideas. To the extent that the newer men's history parallels women's, some studies under that rubric have been similarly skewed. While studies that shine a light on women or men alone should not be abandoned, the attempt to understand gender as it has been defined historically calls for much more work that looks simultaneously and explicitly at constructs for both women and men. Only then will we begin to flesh out the complexities of gender's historical forms.

In sum, we benefit by examining each magazine as a whole, and then by comparing the two to each other. It is crucial as well to locate the texts—and their producers' creation of them—in the context of the larger culture. Simi-

larly, it is central to the topic of gender construction and its relationship to commerce to consider the possible effects of the magazines' gendered and commercial messages on their readers. This is where methods germane to the examination of popular culture come to the fore.

Michael Schudson defines popular culture as "beliefs and practices, and the objects through which they are organized, that are widely shared among a population." The study of popular culture therefore includes analysis of (1) the production of cultural objects, such as newspapers, magazines, and television; (2) the content of the objects; and (3) the reception of objects and the meanings attributed to them by the general population or subpopulations.²⁴ The *Journal* and the *Post* are the objects of this study, and their production, content, and reception are all subjects of examination here.

The reception aspect of cultural study emphasizes the link between the reader and the text. Carl Kaestle, in an essay entitled "The History of Readers," traces various theoretical approaches to characterizing the reader-text connection. Analysts like Raymond Williams and Harold Innis have theorized on a grand scale, emphasizing the themes of centralization and consolidation, and the "subordination of cultural democratization to the needs of capitalism."²⁵ Other more intermediate theories have included the uses and gratifications approach, the psychological interactive reading model, and the reader-response approach. These theories, while they come from different disciplines—communication theory, cognitive psychology, and literary criticism—all feature an emphasis on reading as an interactive process.²⁶

While these grand and intermediate theories have been useful at some levels, our theoretical conclusions vis-à-vis readers and texts are provisional at best. As Kaestle remarks, "the very phenomenon we wish to explore is both empirically elusive and conceptually complex."²⁷ Readers in history cannot be interviewed about their reading, and it is seldom possible to link actual readers with specific texts in the past. It is also very difficult to determine how reading was used by particular readers. Did people read for entertainment, edification, simple distraction, or some combination of these?²⁸ The study of reading requires a balance, not only between the reader and the text, but between the reader's act of making meaning and the social/historical context, and between cultural meaning and social function.²⁹

Kaestle posits a model of reading that incorporates precisely this balance. He theorizes that readers act individually "to develop identities, choose allegiances, form beliefs, and conduct their day-to-day lives, but they do so within the constraints of cultural inheritances and economic relationships."³⁰ This model accounts for both agency and constraint in the world of reading. It accommodates as well the range of responses that is possible for any given text,

and the fact that these responses will not be predictable in all cases. It also suggests, however, that we will see some patterns over time in reading and its uses.³¹

Kaestle et al. identify some general patterns that are relevant to this study. They suggest that literacy expanded impressively although unevenly over the course of the twentieth century; that reading materials increased in number and became increasingly standardized in this period; that the content of printed material was always contested, even as it became standardized; and finally, that literacy had plateaued by the late twentieth century.³² While these larger patterns provide a useful backdrop to a study of magazines and readers, it is, in the end, the producer-text-reader relationship that is of most interest here.

In trying to represent the relationships among producers, texts, and readers, some researchers have turned to visual models. Robert Darnton offers a circuit model, for example, which begins with a book's author, then moves to connections between authors and publishers, publishers and printers, printers and shippers, shippers and booksellers, and booksellers and readers. He represents the important but uncertain connection between readers and authors with a dotted line, leaving the circuit only partially completed.³³

Anthropologists have employed similar connective metaphors to describe culture in general, such as networks, structures, or what Clifford Geertz has called the "web of significance."³⁴ The web metaphor captures the complexity of the relationships among popular culture elements better than the circuit model because it is not linear in design. The web encompasses the producers of the magazine (including publishers, editors, writers, and advertisers), the textual content of the magazines, and the readers who bought the magazines and who may have purchased the products advertised in their pages.

A study of the *Journal* and the *Post* highlights these connections or the lack of them more clearly than studies of some other popular culture objects can, first, because the magazines had to sell themselves to advertisers in order to attract their advertisements, and, second, because they had to appeal to readers in order to attract their subscriptions.³⁵ Similarly, advertisers had to create messages that readers would believe, enjoy, and act on. These decisions were, after all, in the hands of readers. If they were interested in a magazine, they bought it and read it. If they were not interested, they did not even purchase it. Likewise, if they were interested in a product, they bought it, and if they were not interested, they did not.

Commercial markets were in fact expanding rapidly in the late 1800s, which gave rise to the need for advertising in the first place. One sign of this rapid expansion is the shift in commercial discourse from conceptualizing potential buyers as "customers" to describing them as "consumers."³⁶ The shift in language reflects the shift from face-to-face contact in local stores to the less personal contact between commercial messages and thousands of potential

buyers. Advertisers faced the challenge of addressing and enticing thousands of consumers across the nation "personally."

Advertisers coped with this challenge by seeking out a gendered audience for their messages, and a gendered forum for those messages. If the advertisers could target a particular gender group with their messages, they could "personalize" them to a higher degree than if they were more inclusive or neutral. Advertisers were able to capitalize on shared meanings of gender to aim their messages more carefully at some people than at others. They sacrificed some breadth in their target audience in the hopes of making their connection with a smaller constituency deeper and more likely to yield positive results.

Producers of popular culture like Cyrus Curtis and Louisa Knapp Curtis responded to advertisers' demand for a gendered forum for their commercial messages. First, they gathered advertisements that they thought might interest women in particular around a few columns in their newspaper. As those female-targeted advertisements grew in number, and as women seemed to be responding positively, the Curtises provided more editorial material. Within a few months the magazine that became the *Ladies' Home Journal* had taken shape. Thus, the *Journal* was from the start an advertising-driven periodical intended especially for women. Even the *Post*, intended by the Curtis producers to be a magazine for men, would come to target women as well, for similar commercial reasons.

And middle-class women of the day responded, first to the *Journal* and later to the *Post*. Women bought the *Journal* and they also seem to have purchased the advertised products in sufficient numbers to keep the advertisers supporting these periodicals. A major reason for women's positive response is tied to observations I made earlier about the nature of middle-class female gender norms at the turn of the century.

Women were agitating for change in these years, in large part working to expand their breadth of acceptable activities. In this light we see that buying magazines and consuming commercial products—insofar as they involved choosing, making decisions, and at least some small measure of autonomy—represented an appealing expansion of activity for a number of lower-middle-class and middle-class women who had some expendable income. This was a relatively safe expansion of the female role, an expansion that built on tasks previously designated as womanly; that is, the products women began to consume were often products they or their mothers had produced in their homes earlier. Therefore, the shift to "consuming" these items, to buying and using them, did not involve an abrupt change for women.

One might assume that this shift would have threatened lower-middle- and middle-class men, but it does not appear to have done so. The magazines and the advertisements within them offered men their own attractive option. If men were, as I suggested earlier, trying to maintain the gendered status quo at this

time, it was probably in middle-class men's interest to grant women a limited amount of autonomy in exchange for maintaining their own status as primary breadwinners. Men continued to bear the burden of providing for their families, but they retained virtually all of the power and privilege pertaining to this role.³⁷

Producers, advertisers, and readers therefore colluded in the creation and development of a gendered commercial discourse and a commercial gender discourse. All parties believed at the time that they were striking a satisfactory bargain: producers and advertisers made a great deal of money, female readers gained some autonomy and control of the family purse strings, and male readers retained their privileged status. But this bargain, which in some ways further deepened the gender divide of the nineteenth century, proved in the long run to be completely positive only for advertisers. It would be limiting for both producers and readers.

The magazines' producers were unable to break the tie between femininity and commerce when it later suited them to do so; they were forced to target women even when they thought another tactic might be preferable. And, much more importantly, readers were locked into patterns that eventually proved to be problematic as well. Women's role as consumer meant not only that consumers were women, but also that women were consumers. Women since the turn of the century have been defined in the media largely in terms of this aspect of their role, portrayed as buying and using most of the products in the home for the good of the family and to improve themselves. This pattern helps to explain why late twentieth-century women who work in huge numbers outside the home continue to bear the major brunt of the work done inside the home, and continue to be defined by what they buy.³⁸ And men are locked into the provider role, making difficult any attempts to play a more nurturing role in the family.

These are critical patterns for us to understand today, and the negotiation of this hegemonic bargain constitutes the major portion of this study. As I have noted above, gender is a slippery concept and the reader-text connection is slippery as well. In attempting to examine the two as clearly and thoroughly as possible I have (1) looked for complexity, tension, and contradiction in each of the magazines as a whole; (2) explicitly compared female-centered and male-centered material; (3) located the producers, texts, and readers in their social context; and (4) looked at change over time. The themes emerging as most important from content analysis of the *Ladies' Home Journal* are housekeeping, male-female relations, women's rights, and consumerism; those from the *Saturday Evening Post* are work, male-female relations, and women's rights. I read the magazines as I thought readers might, giving roughly equal weight to all their features, including editorials, departments, fiction, advertisements, and reader letters. While this may run roughshod over differences among genres within the magazines, it does seem to approximate more closely the way a

typical browsing, relatively nondiscriminating reader might have "consumed" each magazine.

The book as a whole is divided by basic historiographic approach. The odd-numbered chapters are informed mainly by social history and gender history themes and approaches. They focus on the activities of the magazines' producers and on the development of the magazines as social institutions. The even-numbered chapters are informed more by cultural history and, again, by gender history themes and techniques.³⁹ They feature close content analysis of each magazine as a whole, culminating in chapter eight with a comparison of the two magazines over the same span of years. The even-numbered chapters also include my speculations about the magazines' impact on their readers. I conclude with an Epilogue that discusses the ramifications of the Curtis publications' contours for the publishing world of the twentieth century.

In 1883 Cyrus Curtis and Louisa Knapp Curtis introduced a magazine that had once comprised a single newspaper column. Within twenty years the Curtises had built a magazine empire that reached millions of readers and earned millions of dollars. As prototypes of highly commercial mass-circulation magazines and as forerunners of other kinds of commercial media, the Curtis publications had a profound impact on American popular culture. They helped to promote a relationship between gender and commerce that has been complicated, long-lasting, and powerful.

A Man, a Woman, and a New Magazine: Cyrus Curtis
and Louisa Knapp Curtis and the *Ladies' Home
Journal*, 1883–1889

In 1883, Cyrus Curtis and Louisa Knapp Curtis decided to turn their newspaper column for women into a separate monthly supplement to their weekly newspaper. After Louisa had prepared the material for the first number of the supplement, Cyrus took it to the office to be set in type. Upon receiving the material, the composing-room manager asked Cyrus what he wanted to call the supplement. Legend has it that Cyrus answered, "Call it anything you like. It's sort of a ladies' journal." The composition manager carried this vague notion to an engraver, who drew a masthead for the supplement, using *The Ladies' Journal* as a title. To embellish the words the engraver added to the title a picture of a home, engraving the word "Home" under it. The first subscription request for the new magazine asked for "The Ladies' Home Journal," as did most subsequent orders, and thus an unknown engraver and its earliest subscribers named the first American mass-circulation magazine.¹

The story of the *Ladies' Home Journal* name highlights the relatively unstructured nature of the 1880s world of magazine publishing, a world that this new magazine itself had a significant part in defining. With their "sort of a ladies' journal," as Cyrus described it, the Curtises established a model for an important genre of magazines in the United States. This genre has remained remarkably stable over the course of a century.

Even more importantly, Cyrus and Louisa helped to mediate the interaction of the growing consumer culture with notions about gender, providing in their magazine a forum for the intersection of these two significant cultural forces. Many elements combined to propel the *Journal* into the mass-circulation magazine ranks: the personal characteristics and relationship of the editor and publisher, the expansion of reading audiences, and commercial developments that included the rise of middle-class consumption and the demand for national advertising. Cyrus Curtis and Louisa Knapp Curtis were commercial pioneers who oversaw the intersection of gendered reading with the demand for a gendered advertising forum to create and develop the highly successful *Ladies' Home Journal*.

Cyrus Curtis was born in 1850 in Portland, Maine. The son of poor but cultured and loving parents, he took on the role of hard-headed businessman and

1.a. The Early *Journal* Masthead.

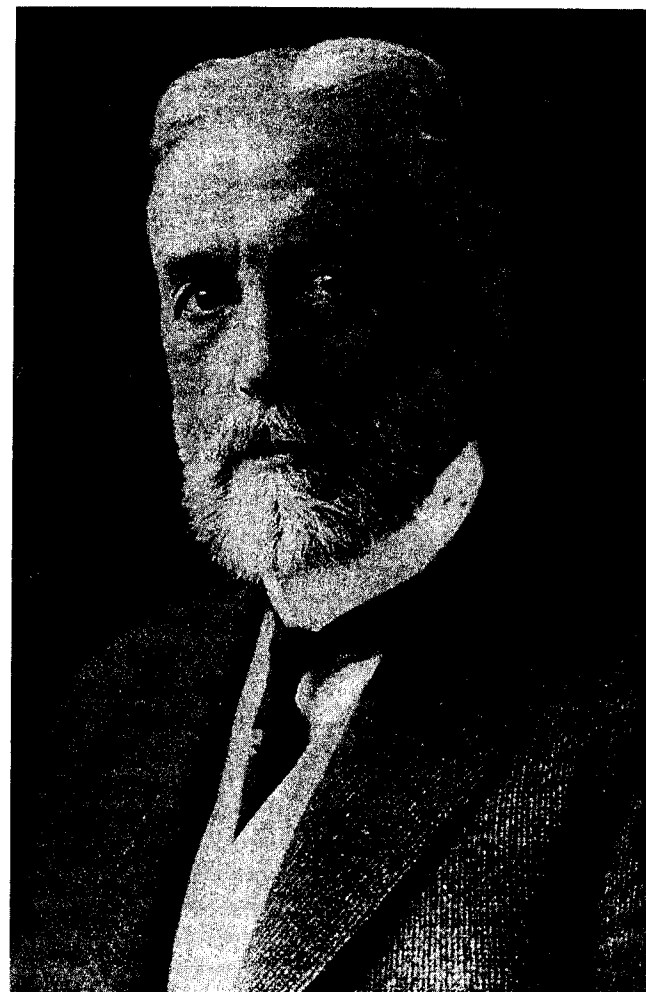
provider early in his life. His instinct for business and hard work as a newspaper boy paid off, and when he was fifteen the first issue of Curtis's first newspaper, *Young America*, appeared on the Portland scene. Curtis was soon selling 400 copies of his paper weekly, earning him the impressive sum of eight dollars per week. The next year, however, Curtis's printing operation was lost in a fire that also destroyed most of his family's belongings. The future publisher gave up hopes of further schooling. After several years of clerking in a general store, he left the town of Portland at nineteen to make his way in Boston.²

The young man held down a job in a dry-goods store, supplementing his income by soliciting newspaper advertisements for an advertising agency on his lunch hour. Though shy by nature, Curtis moved quite comfortably in the world of business. In 1872 he joined forces with a partner who put up the capital for a weekly, which they called *The People's Ledger*. Soon he was doing all the work on the paper, and within a year Cyrus had bought his partner out.³

Curtis's years in Boston saw a development more significant than the acquisition of a periodical, however. In 1874 he met Louisa Knapp, a woman a year younger than he, and the two soon fell in love.⁴ Knapp was at the time serving as private secretary to Samuel Gridley Howe, a prominent Boston doctor and reformer and the husband of activist Julia Ward Howe. Louisa's work experience was unusual at a time when women constituted only about 14 percent of the labor force, and less than 3 percent of the clerical work force.⁵ Given the fact that Knapp was the daughter of an established businessman, her work for pay was even more unusual, and it seems to have led her to a certain flexibility of attitude on the issue of paid work for women.⁶

Knapp's work experience also gave her a first-hand knowledge of the business world. Edward Bok, the second editor of the *Ladies' Home Journal* and son-in-law of the Curtises, wrote years later that "the workings of a man's mind

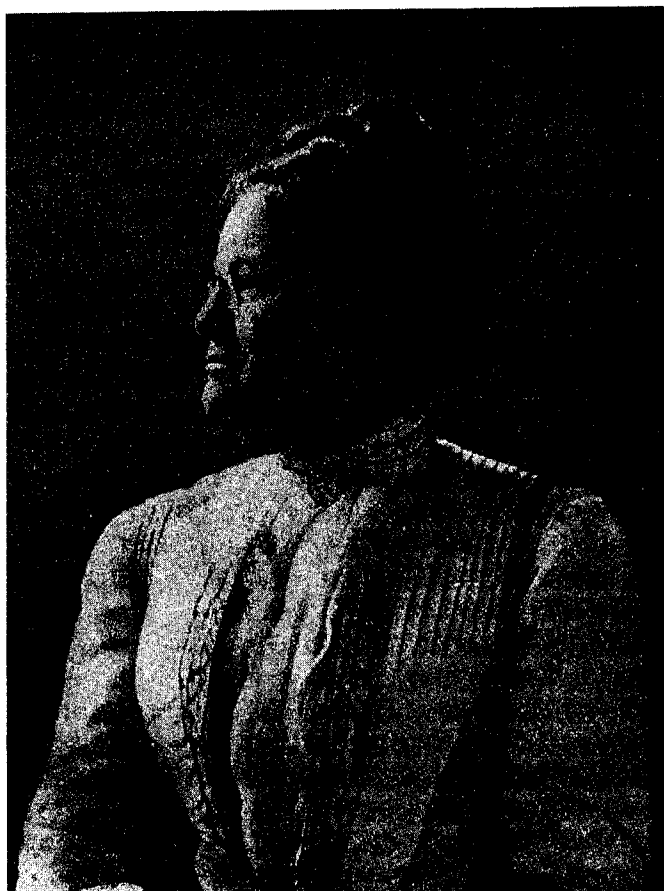
1.b. Cyrus H.K. Curtis. Courtesy Charles Scribner's Sons.



were not a new revelation to Mrs. Curtis," a fact that served her well in her subsequent partnership with Cyrus.⁷

Cyrus Curtis had a talent for recognizing and encouraging special abilities in others. Early in their relationship he sensed Louisa's business and editorial abilities and encouraged her to apply them. Louisa was a practical, down-to-earth extrovert, thereby complementing Curtis's shy demeanor at the same time that she reinforced his business acumen and drive. Her earlier work experience

I.c. Louisa Knapp Curtis. Courtesy Charles Scribner's Sons.



and her ongoing interest in public activity led her to work with her husband both on and off the company payroll. The strength of their partnership had a great deal to do with the success they were to achieve together.

They were married on March 10, 1875, and their first and only child, Mary Louise, was born in August of 1876, when Cyrus was twenty-six and Louisa twenty-five years old. Cyrus had long been interested in Philadelphia as a publishing city, and upon learning that he could publish the *People's Ledger* more cheaply there than in Boston, the Curtises decided to move to Philadelphia. The

weekly newspaper field was very crowded, however. Curtis struggled with various publications until 1879, when his brother-in-law lent him two thousand dollars in order to establish the *Tribune and the Farmer*, a four-page weekly selling for fifty cents a year.⁸ Cyrus edited the newspaper while Louisa served as business manager. The Curtises, employing an innovative approach, brought in an advertising manager who solicited advertisements for the paper and collected payment for them.

The Curtises' publishing breakthrough did not come, however, until they began running a "Women and Home" column in the *Tribune and the Farmer*. The new column was originally added largely out of expedience. One week in the late summer of 1883 Cyrus found his paper three columns short. Thinking of material that could be gathered quickly and easily from other sources, and that could be built around advertisements that might be of particular interest to women, Curtis proposed a "woman's department" to fill the space.⁹ The column ran regularly thereafter, featuring odds and ends taken from various sources. This material was then surrounded by advertisements geared to women. Curtis clipped the items from what he believed were reliable newspaper columns and advice pamphlets.

But Louisa criticized the column, saying, "I don't want to make fun of you, but if you really knew how funny this material sounds to a woman, you would laugh, too."¹⁰ As Cyrus Curtis's biographer later commented, "Mr. Curtis never dreamed for a moment that in his wife's laugh was hidden his first great success."¹¹ Louisa moved from the business to the editorial department of the *Tribune and the Farmer* on the grounds that she as a woman could produce higher quality reading matter for women. She replaced the old reprinted items with fresh material of her own, and the column soon grew to fill a page. Louisa's department for women began to stimulate a great deal of correspondence and to attract more support from advertisers. Consequently, the Curtises decided to publish a monthly women's supplement to the weekly *Tribune*. The first issue of that supplement, entitled the *Ladies' Journal*, edited by Louisa under her maiden name and published by Cyrus, appeared in December of 1883.¹²

The *Ladies' Home Journal* therefore evolved from a newspaper column to a department to a supplement, which quickly outstripped the original paper in popularity. While the practical details of this evolution are unremarkable, the cultural ramifications of the early *Journal's* evolution are striking. The creation of the "Women and Home" column and its evolution into the early *Ladies' Home Journal* rested in part on the significant changes in the status of women as readers which were occurring in the mid-nineteenth century.

Reading was common among some groups of women much earlier than the mid-nineteenth century. Late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Puritan women, for example, were responsible for catechizing their children and

hence for reading the Bible in the home.¹³ By the 1780s educational opportunities for women beyond this group had begun to expand significantly. Between 1780 and 1830 women began increasingly to attend district schools and academies, and the justification for expanded literacy had broadened from the needs of Republican motherhood to the notion that reading was for women, as it was for men, "a necessity of life."¹⁴

Reading among elite groups may already have been differentiated by gender to some degree by the mid-eighteenth century. Men were said to read newspapers and history more often, while women were believed to use their inferior intellects more on the less rigorous fare of fiction and devotional literature.¹⁵ But many American women did not read at all in the eighteenth century, and it was not until the first half of the nineteenth century that a large new reading public coalesced. By then, 90 percent of the American people were minimally literate, and technological advances in printing and paper making made literature accessible to more readers than ever before. *Harper's Magazine*, one of the new organs of middle-class culture, proclaimed that "literature has gone in pursuit of the million, penetrated highways and hedges, pressed its way into cottages, factories, omnibuses, and railroad cars, and become the most cosmopolitan thing of the century."¹⁶

Women were an important part of the new reading public. Magazines for women began to appear in the early to mid-nineteenth century, targeting mainly a well-to-do audience but signalling an important segmenting of reading by gender. The mid-nineteenth century also saw a notable increase in book sales among women of some means. It was good business to target women readers for magazine and book publishers alike. Women in the mid-nineteenth century were beginning to be regarded as a special interest group worthy of special attention. It was in these years as well that children's books were targeted by gender, reflecting both the emphasis on childhood as a distinct, discrete phase of life, and the notion that reading was an appropriate vehicle for gender-role socialization.¹⁷

The experience of one woman who would eventually write for the *Ladies' Home Journal* represents these important new trends in the reading of middle- to upper-class educated women in the nineteenth century. Marion Harland was born in 1830 and came of age in mid-century. She was a popular writer of advice books, novels, and magazine short stories and advice columns in the mid- to late nineteenth century. Harland's commentary on her family's reading is revealing:

My sister and I read "The Spectator" aloud to our mother as she sat busy with fine needlework, and learned whole books of Cowper's "Task" and Thomson's "Seasons" . . . rushed through Plutarch's "Lives" with breathless energy no novelist could now provoke . . . and on Sundays pored over "Pilgrim's Progress," Pollock's "Course of Time," and Young's "Night Thoughts." Our

mother took "The New York Mirror" and "Graham," and "Godey," and the "Saturday Evening Courier." On winter nights my father relaxed his objections to light reading so far as to read aloud from these columns.¹⁸

In Harland's home, then, reading was an accepted, even a central activity for women. Though her father seems to have controlled much of the family's reading aloud, it was her mother who subscribed to several of the leading periodicals of the day, including newspapers. This agency on the part of women readers certainly goes well beyond catechizing children, and it is an important development in the evolution of women as readers.

Barbara Sicherman's case study of women's reading in late-Victorian America highlights precisely this sort of agency. She finds that by the late nineteenth century, women as a group were "integral to the culture of reading."¹⁹ They had established reading clubs, literary societies, and libraries in community after community across the country. More importantly, she asserts that many individual women

found in reading a way of apprehending the world that enabled them to overcome some of the confines of gender and class. Reading provided space—physical, temporal, and psychological—that permitted women to exempt themselves from traditional gender expectations, whether imposed by formal society or by family obligations.²⁰

Women read, in other words, not only to escape, but also actively to reshape some of the constraints of their world.

One of the central questions for social historians of reading is whether reading was indeed a liberating or a constraining activity. Making such a judgment rests on situating a group of readers in a particular time period and evaluating their specific circumstances. For example, newly literate female readers in colonial America appear to have experienced a liberating effect from learning to read. Reading became one of the few activities available to such women that were in some measure private and performed for themselves.²¹ For this group, as for Barbara Sicherman's upper-class Victorian women, reading appears to have been relatively liberating.

But the experience of another group of women tells a somewhat different story. Reading for the female readers of the eighteenth-century British magazine, the *Tatler*, was clearly less beneficial. It is the case that the male-edited *Tatler*, to the extent that it targeted women readers specifically, acknowledged women's importance as readers. It courted women and encouraged them to read. But the magazine's direct and indirect messages reinforced female subordination to patriarchal structures. In this instance, therefore, one might say that reading became a liability because the more women read the more exposure they had to the patriarchal status quo.²²

Thus some women at some times seem to have experienced more benefits from reading, while other women at other times appear to have suffered more

from the constraints of reading. On balance, then, reading would appear to be a mixed blessing. Literacy is certainly one of the keys to changing one's status, and in this light it is critical to women's struggle. But print material is on the whole more supportive of conformity than it is of change. Consequently, its effect on readers may be more limiting than it is liberating.²³ A close look at the readership of both the *Journal* and the *Post* in forthcoming chapters will feature careful consideration of this issue.

Some women of Marion Harland's generation became major producers of culture themselves. Harland, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Rose Terry Cooke were among the first American women to become mainstream writers, and they dominated reading lists for much of the nineteenth century.²⁴ Marion Harland and her mother therefore illustrate the evolution from women as readers for the purpose of teaching children, to women as active pursuers of reading matter for themselves, to women as producers of reading matter for others.

Harland and others like her also represent an important broadening of the function of women's reading. Harland's mother, a fairly well-to-do woman with servants, was a member of the primary audience for which *Godey's Lady's Magazine* and similar periodicals were produced.²⁵ With its fashion plates, reprinted sheet music, and sentimental fiction, to say nothing of its two-dollar per year subscription price, *Godey's* was geared to an elite audience. The magazine had attained a circulation of one hundred and fifty thousand by 1860 and was the first major American women's magazine, but by the 1880s many mainstream women writers like Harland would be writing for a different kind of publication: the practical, cheaper, helpful-hints magazine.²⁶ Such magazines would soon eclipse elite magazines like *Godey's* in popularity.

These years also witnessed, therefore, a change in the function of reading for many women. Some women may have experienced an increase in leisure in the days of early industrialization, allowing for more reading for entertainment and general enlightenment. But for most women in the early nineteenth century new domestic chores simply took the place of old ones. As stoves replaced open fireplaces and products like flour were commercially produced, diets became more varied and cooking more complicated; as fabric was produced outside the home and paper patterns were made available for home use, wardrobes became more elaborate.²⁷

These new tasks and others meant that there were larger gaps between the experiences of one generation of women and the next, a problem that was exacerbated in many cases by the physical separation of the generations resulting from migration.²⁸ In a culture where at least some women were undertaking new tasks, and where women were often separated from traditional sources of advice and information, helpful-hints literature was potentially more and more relevant to many women's everyday activities.

The nineteenth century thus saw an important broadening of the reading public to include more and more women, the increasing gender segregation of reading materials, and a broadening of the function of reading for women. These trends relied in part on the development of a cohesive middle class, or a "self-conscious socio-cultural group."²⁹ This group consisted mostly of native-born, Protestant, white collar, salaried business and professional men and their families. Their group identity was informed by a shared set of morals, values, and attitudes, and by a certain cluster of cultural features: the home and what went into it, residential location, child-rearing strategies, leisure activities, and levels and patterns of consumption.³⁰

Men's class definition, since it rested in large part on occupation, was somewhat more direct than women's in the mid- to late nineteenth century. Most women's financial dependence on men tied their status to men's occupations. Yet women were responsible for many of the trappings of the middle-class: home, child-rearing strategies, leisure activities, and—to an increasing degree over the course of the nineteenth century—levels and patterns of consumption. Consequently, the Consumer Revolution that paralleled the Industrial Revolution seems to have been informed by gender concerns and assumptions from its earliest days.

The beginnings of the Consumer Revolution appear to be situated in the decades after 1830. These years saw the expansion of the production of goods intended for middle-class consumption, including furniture, carpeting, china, glassware, and elaborate fashions.³¹ The consumer culture as we know it today took shape more firmly in the 1880s, when business expanded rapidly, transportation networks improved, and national markets grew.³² Producers sought national markets when continuous-process machinery put out many more goods per unit than had been possible in the past. The decade of the 1880s saw the almost simultaneous invention of such machinery for making flour, breakfast cereals, soup and other canned products, matches, photographic film, and cigarettes.³³ American producers at this point chose to control neither output nor prices but sales, a development that made ever larger national markets crucial.³⁴ With the dramatic improvement of the nation's transportation and communications infrastructure, the stage was set for the rise of mass markets.

One of the businesses ancillary to the new large corporations' drive to create national markets was the advertising agency. Given their much higher output, companies like Campbell, Heinz, and Borden had to embark on massive advertising campaigns conducted with the help of these agencies.³⁵ In turn, advertising agents, along with publishers like Cyrus Curtis, had to convince manufacturers of the importance of advertising. Many business people were reluctant to advertise because advertising had been dominated for years by patent-medicine manufacturers, long viewed as charlatans in the business

world. The new agents showed business people that respectable claims would do the sale of their products more good than harm. They also helped manufacturers to create advertisements that spoke directly to consumers, in an attempt to convince merchants to stock the product if they did not already do so.³⁶ And women were increasingly the targets of these advertisements.

Women had traditionally been responsible for making and/or using several of the products increasingly turned out by continuous-process machinery, a crucial fact in the history of consumption and advertising, and in the history of gender construction as well. Since a number of the earliest mass-produced items were assumed to be of interest to women, and since producers needed to move them and used advertising to do it, a significant proportion of early advertising was targeted specifically to women. By the late 1800s women were perceived to be at least potential consumers of a variety of products like clothing and entertainment items, and they were already viewed as the major consumers of household goods. One analyst calls this development the "feminization of American purchasing."³⁷ By 1895 a brochure for the advertising Lord and Thomas was asserting that

She who "rocks the cradle" and "rules the world" is directly and indirectly head of the buying department of every home. The advertiser who makes a favorable impression with her may be sure of the patronage of the family.³⁸

Gender provided an avenue through which advertisers could "personalize" their increasingly impersonal contacts with potential buyers. As markets became national, neither local nor regional product identifications were meaningful. Gender-related assumptions provided a discourse through which advertisers could reach a targeted yet national audience. We see very early in the history of advertising that advertisers sacrificed a possibly broader audience—that is, both women and men—for the narrower gender-targeted audience that was perceived to be reachable through a particular gender discourse. But this discourse would need a suitable conduit, a medium through which advertisers could reach out to middle-class women who had some money to spend.

Cyrus Curtis and Louisa Knapp Curtis were ready to capitalize. They saw that a magazine designed expressly for women that featured a practical emphasis could be an important forum for advertising. Edward Bok later noted the significance of the "Women and Home" column's commercial function: "It was a productive field, since, as woman was the purchasing power, it would benefit the newspaper enormously in its advertising if it could offer a feminine clientele."³⁹ Other women's magazines founded in this period also had explicit ties to commercialism. While each of these publications eventually became the broader product now known as a women's magazine, *McCall's* came from a flyer featuring dress patterns, and the *Woman's Home Companion* and *Good*

Housekeeping originated as mail-order journals.⁴⁰ The recognition of women's power to consume by the late 1800s thus led to the establishment of magazines for women that were highly identified with consumption.

These magazines were also established because of the sense that women's interests were easily addressed in one contained "package." Although mid- to late nineteenth-century women came from all walks of life, producers of books, newspapers, and magazines confidently offered reading material that could speak to many of women's interests in a relatively small space. Women with some expendable income were assumed to share a set of domestic and familial interests. And, if they were addressed at all in newspapers, women were addressed in a single column, page, or supplement. Similarly, producers believed that all of women's interests and all women of some means could be addressed in one magazine.

This trend toward packaging women's interests in a single publication parallels and is to some extent a product of the metaphor of separate spheres, which informed at least some thinking in the nineteenth century. Women, insofar as they were confined to the private sphere in such thinking, were allocated a separate, discrete space that was, metaphorically speaking, smaller and more limiting than men's space in the public sphere. Men's larger, more flexible sphere did not actually resemble a circumscribed sphere at all. The metaphor was therefore fundamentally flawed, since there was no men's sphere to correspond neatly to women's sphere. Applying the metaphor to the lives of both men and women also implied an equal division of labor that did not exist. Finally, it implied an equal division of income and economic power that did not exist. As we shall see, use of this flawed spheres metaphor had a critical impact on the development of both gender relationships and commerce at the turn of the century.

The currency of the spheres metaphor suggests the artificiality of the private/public dichotomy that also informed the development of commercial magazines in the late nineteenth century. For example, the *Ladies' Home Journal*, as published by Cyrus and edited by Louisa, was a public product, since it was created and printed in the business world, sent through the public mails, and financed by advertisers. But the magazine was read in people's homes, and it spoke to private issues such as establishing and maintaining a household, parenting, and marital relations. Similarly, advertising in the 1880s began to commodify needs and activities previously recognized as private, including cooking, eating, cleaning, dressing, bathing, and nursing.

As we shall see, the *Journal's* producers were informed by and employed different variations on the private/public theme. At this point in the early stages of the *Journal's* development, the distinction between private and public was quite purposely blurry, reflecting the editor's views on gender construction and her stance on women's issues. Future editors would employ the dichotomy more rigorously.

Women's magazines were not, of course, the only magazines on the market. The Curtises began publishing their *Journal* 142 years after the first American magazine was founded in 1741. But historically, magazines in the U.S. had not been a dominant medium. A major impetus to magazine founding on the national scale was the Postal Mailing Act of March 3, 1879, which established favorable mailing rates for periodicals. The Postal Mailing Act was enacted in an attempt to create a national press that might be the "mucilage" to hold the Northern and Southern states together.⁴¹ Between 1865 and 1885 the number of periodicals increased more than fourfold, from 700 to 3,300.

The average citizen in these later years was still not a magazine reader, however. The magazine market was polarized, with quality monthlies like *Harper's* and *Scribner's* at one end of the spectrum, and cheap weeklies and story papers at the other end. In the mid-1880s things began to change; the next fifteen years would be a golden age of mass-circulation magazine founding. Many factors were influential, including technological advances in the printing trades, faster delivery possibilities by means of railroads and rural free delivery postal routes, businesses hungry to create national markets, and the shift from bulk to packaged merchandise. No one profited more from these developments than did Cyrus and Louisa Knapp Curtis.

The goal of publishers like Curtis was to sell as much advertising and as many magazines as possible. The business story of the early *Ladies' Home Journal* illustrates how a successful publisher went about doing so. The first issue of the supplement appeared in December of 1883, with Louisa Knapp as editor and Cyrus Curtis as publisher. Curtis from the start relied on advertising in order to supplement the six cents an issue he charged, but he used other devices to build the *Journal's* circulation as well. While the magazine's subscription price was fifty cents for a year, from the beginning club or group memberships at four for a dollar were offered. The *Journal* also offered premiums for new subscriptions. For one new subscriber a woman could "earn" a lace doily, for five a beaded purse, for fifty a desk, for seventy-five a piano. Curtis was consciously seeking a wide lower-middle-class to middle-class audience for the magazine, one to whom his advertisers could sell their new products.

The *Ladies' Home Journal* was a major prototype for all mass-circulation magazines. It sold cheaply to thousands of readers and relied heavily on advertising for making profits. In tandem with Louisa's editorial efforts, Cyrus's strategy worked amazingly well. The *Journal's* circulation was 25,000 at the end of its first year, double that in six more months, and by 1886 it had reached the impressive figure of 400,000. The Curtises were not content with this phe-

nomenal growth, however, and in 1888 they engaged the N. W. Ayer Company to advertise their magazine in three other periodicals—at a total cost of four hundred dollars.

In fact, Cyrus Curtis's relationship during these years with the advertising agency N. W. Ayer illustrates the pivotal role Curtis played in the advertising world of the late nineteenth century. He first used the Ayer agency to place advertisements for the *Journal* in other magazines. Ayer then began to buy advertising space in the *Journal* for some of its clients. Curtis designed most of the advertisements himself, pioneering in the use of white space to make the advertisements more noticeable and appealing. In turn, in the late 1880s the Ayer Agency lent Curtis much of the \$310,000 he spent in a massive advertising campaign that gave the *Journal* the unheard-of circulation figure of 452,000. His pioneering role in creating and employing effective advertisements is signaled by the fact that Cyrus Curtis, magazine publisher, was also known in his time as the "Father of Modern Advertising."⁴² His greatest contribution in the long run was his advancement of the concept of selling directly to women.

By 1889 Curtis had decided to consolidate his gains. He increased his advertising rates and abolished cut-rate subscriptions to the magazine. This resulted in a short-term drop in circulation, but the *Journal* soon gained other subscriptions. Curtis had essentially raised the quality of both his advertisers and his audience to a truly middle-class level.

The *Ladies' Home Journal* had offices in New York and Chicago as well as in Philadelphia by this time, and in 1889 the magazine employed seven to ten people a day simply to open letters. After seeking as wide an audience as possible, and then firming up his subscription list by withdrawing cut-rate offers, Curtis in 1889 claimed to reach the best classes of American families.⁴³ He and Louisa decided that the July 1889 issue would double in size, becoming a thirty-two page magazine with a cover. In a few short years the magazine had evolved from a collection of helpful hints in a newspaper to a phenomenon in the publishing industry.

Hence Cyrus Curtis and Louisa Knapp Curtis presided over the union of reading, consuming, and advertising with gendered assumptions about middle-class women in their new magazine. One of the unintended results of their publishing venture was the print media's further institutionalization of gender difference in American popular culture. The *Ladies' Home Journal* was an influential contributor to the trend toward heightened gender differences in print matter that was gathering force in the late nineteenth century.

The Curtises were pioneers in the field of magazine publishing. They saw a need for a certain kind of publication and they worked to fill that need. The Curtises were certainly interested in realizing profits from their magazine. But

Louisa in particular desired as well to be of service to her late-nineteenth century peers. Editing the *Ladies' Home Journal* was also challenging and fulfilling work. We turn now to the messages conveyed in Louisa's *Journal*, messages that helped so much to define gendered commercialism and commercialized gender at the turn of the last century.

2

From Gendered Lives to a Gendered Magazine: The Content of the *Journal*, 1883–1889

The fact that Louisa Knapp's *Ladies' Home Journal* was a commercial product affected the magazine's mission from the start. It was critical that Knapp's magazine entertain as well as edify, and the *Journal* sought to engage its readers as well as to give them practical information. Knapp's *Journal* was a feminine text, produced primarily by women for women. Knapp and her staff viewed their readers as peers and they spoke to them and heard from them in what they considered to be a two-way exchange. Images of women in Knapp's *Journal* were varied, and flexibility was the magazine's general orientation with regard to women's roles.

Louisa Knapp commented freely in the *Journal* on the state of American women's lives as she perceived them in the 1880s. Her magazine sought to empower and free women, and Knapp and her contributors were not afraid to note obstacles blocking women's progress and to suggest a variety of solutions. However, one of the major solutions they recommended—increased consuming by women—was entirely compatible with and supportive of patriarchal capitalism. And readers responded positively to Louisa's and her staff's consumer-centered solutions. Together, then, *Journal* staffers and readers helped to lay the groundwork for an increasingly commercial gender discourse.

Gender construction was a thoughtful, relatively conscious process in the *Ladies' Home Journal* during Knapp's tenure. This construction took various forms. At one level the magazine simply embodied middle-class womanhood: its various features and departments corresponded to perceived interests in women's lives, and its overall tone bespoke middle-class femininity. But gender was represented more concretely in images of women that the magazine presented in fiction and feature articles, and in its direct reflection on gender matters in editorials.

We see evidence of active gender construction in Louisa's own life as well. Louisa Knapp needed to resolve the contradiction between the domestic orientation of her magazine and the fact of its thoroughly commercial nature and its success as a product on the market. How could a woman who espoused domesticity and touted its importance edit what was fast becoming a national, mass-circulation magazine? The way in which Louisa resolved this contradiction helps to illuminate the process of gender construction for women.